

Outstanding Women of Oxford County

Introduction by Sarah Kolasiewicz, Project Leader

Extrait d'une étude entreprise par deux étudiants du niveau secondaire sur les 'femmes exceptionnelles du comté d'Oxford' — programme subventionné par la province de l'Ontario.

For a number of years, the Oxford County Board of Education has applied for 'Experience' grants to hire students for summer employment. The 'Experience' program is funded by the Ontario government and aims at providing not only summer wages for students, but as the name suggests, working experience for them. The Oxford Board ran several projects during the summer of 1979 involving students in various tasks ranging from the cataloguing of books to the organization of reading classes for children. For the first time, a grant was provided for an exciting and ambitious project called 'The History of Outstanding Women of Oxford County'. The project was initiated when history teachers in the county expressed a need for additional information on the history of women due to changes in the intermediate history curriculum.

Two high school students were hired for a period of six weeks during June and July. A project leader, hired earlier in the summer was responsible for preliminary preparations for the booklet. This involved meeting with history teachers to discuss the student researchers' areas of concentration. We decided that isolated portraits of local women would not be as useful as those that were fitted into an historical framework or context. Once certain historical periods and areas of study in the curriculum were pointed out, we were able to come up with a list of women we thought would be representative of particular trends — or who were simply remarkable in their own time. Suggestions of 'outstanding women' came from every direction and it was obvious we would have no problems finding the subject matter for our study! In fact, since the project only lasted six weeks, we had to choose a few women from a list of many in order to focus our studies.

The research was divided into several sections which later developed into the five chapters of the booklet. A general introduction and introductions to each chapter were provided while portraits of local women were gathered under general headings — pioneer women, women as artists, women and religion, medical women, and women in politics. Many sketches, questions and ideas for individual projects were provided as well as a list at the end of each chapter of the resources available about the person and topic discussed.

Since the project was viewed enthusiastically by the history teachers in the county, we began our work with a positive attitude. We did not have to deal with the legitimacy of such a study. Although all of us involved obviously viewed the project in a positive light, it was

encouraging to know that teachers felt a need for such material in the classroom. So often summer jobs are looked upon as 'make-work' projects, but this was not the case. Both project initiators and Board personnel viewed the task seriously and gave helpful criticisms as the work progressed so that the students involved worked hard to meet high expectations.

Once the actual research got underway, we encountered few problems in gathering information since local historians have kept extensive records in Oxford County. Often, it was more a matter of drawing these materials together and pointing out the locations of study materials for teachers and students rather than digging up new information. The Tweedsmuir Histories, for example, provided a valuable source of information and the Public Library in Woodstock has several files on local history. Certain individuals have taken an interest in a particular woman over the years and they were willing to share their information with us. This is not to say that primary research was not done. In fact, archives in both Norwich and Toronto provided us with extensive material and gave us a chance to experience both the joys and problems of using primary sources in historical research. Interviews with friends, acquaintances or descendants of the women we were studying helped to fill in information gaps and provided us with amusing and interesting anecdotes to liven the text of the booklet.

By the end of the six-week project, the final copy of the booklet, 'Outstanding Women of Oxford County', was completed and had been proofread. Donna Stevenson illustrated the booklet which we felt was so important in making it an enjoyable visual source of information and Brenda Dyer spent many hours at the typewriter perfecting the text. The Oxford County Board of Education provided us with all the artist's tools, paper and typewriting supplies we could have hoped for. An office secretary typed the final manuscript and the Board's printing office produced the final product. Booklets were sent out to each of the county's schools in November and these will be kept in school libraries or resource centres. They will be available to both teachers and students and many of the pages (specially marked) are particularly suitable for photostating for class distribution to stimulate discussion. Obviously, it will be a while before we receive any feedback from teachers and we hope the reactions will be positive.

As a whole, the 'Outstanding Women of Oxford County' project provided many positive experiences. Apart from providing a resource package which we hope

will be well used, project workers gained valuable personal experience. We each learned a great deal more about our community, the importance of women in both local and national history and had a chance to find out — first hand — about methods of historical research. We

had only six weeks to complete, what was in many ways, an enormous task. Occasionally we felt hard-pressed for time. We hope that such research will become an on-going activity for students across the country and, in this way, the women who contributed so much to the building of Canada will take their place in our history books. ©

Lydia Chase Ranney 1800-1901

Extracts from Outstanding Women of Oxford County by Brenda Dyer, Sarah Kolasiewicz, and Donna Stevenson, Oxford County Board of Education, 1979.

Born in Massachusetts in 1800, Lydia Chase grew up with the daily chores of cheese and butter-making. Fortunately for cheese lovers across Canada, Lydia came to be the founder of Ingersoll's cheese industry and the first cheddar cheese-maker in Canada. At a time when milking was 'woman's work', Lydia proved her energy and resourcefulness as the operator of a business which supplied cheese for many residents of Oxford County and beyond.

When Lydia married Hiram Ranney in 1819, they purchased 25 cattle and established a cheese business in Vermont. Lydia's organizational skills and dairy 'know-how' soon resulted in the Ranneys selling cheese and butter to the Boston market. Later, a bad business deal with relatives caused the Ranneys to lose their land, making it necessary for them to seek new property.

In a covered wagon, Hiram and Lydia travelled through Lower Canada (now Quebec) and stayed there for a few years. Moving on through Upper Canada, they eventually arrived in Ingersoll and stayed with the Hagel family. Mr. Hagel recognized Lydia's refinement and education and, as a result, he persuaded her to remain at Hagel's Corners to teach the local children. Lydia had been a school teacher in Vermont and did not mind the idea of organizing a school. Soon after, the Ranneys bought a 50-acre farm five miles south of Ingersoll and built their own house, using a combination of wood and clay bricks.

Lydia rode into St. Thomas alone on horseback to secure her teaching certificate for practice in Canada. She taught in a little log school house from 1834 to 1842, earning the title of the first school teacher in the area. The school where she taught in Salford received the first legislative grant in the county.

Gradually, thoughts of the dairy business turned Lydia's interests away from teaching. In 1842, she began making cheese in a lean-to at the back of the Ranney plank house. Three cows were kept in front of the house, and Lydia did all of the milking and cheese-making herself, while Hiram farmed.

The Ranney cheddar cheese-making was the first of its kind in Canada and the Ranneys kept busy with the production and sale of their cheddar. Lydia and her girls made cheeses weighing up to

1,000 pounds for display at fairs around the area. Regular trips to Guelph, Hamilton and London were made by Hiram over the bumpy roads in a horsecart. A 120-mile round trip to Hamilton via the Old Stage Road took four days by wagon.

Over the years, the Ranney operation influenced others to follow similar endeavours and cheese factories appeared across Oxford County. There were outside forces as well. Prior to 1850, the United States was well advanced in scientific methods of the dairying trade. When the American Civil War began, trade routes from the United States to Britain were often blocked by patrol ships. As a result, the Americans could not ship cheese to Britain. This proved advantageous to Canada, for with a ready market like Britain, cheese-making boomed. Cheese was added to the scant list of Canadian exports; timber, fish and furs were previously the chief trade between Great Britain and Canada. Coupled with the right climate and soil for dairy cattle, Oxford County was a prime place for the cheese industry. By 1870, Canada was shipping over 300,000 boxes of cheese to Britain annually.

Before Lydia Ranney's death in 1901, she saw her modest efforts at cheese-making grow into a county-wide industry with factories replacing farm methods and an export trade bringing renown and prosperity to Oxford County. Her profound influence on Oxford County can be seen by the growth of cheese factories — in 1904, there were 200 cheese factories in Oxford! Lydia encouraged a certain Mrs. Charles Wilson to enter the cheese business, and James Harris, maker of Ingersoll's 'Big Cheese', was trained by Lydia also. We owe our thanks to Lydia Ranney, who through capable organization and constant energy, made a lasting contribution to Oxford County.

Lydia Ranney appears to have been a pioneer woman worthy of great respect. Although women in the rural setting were often the equals of men, as they ran the home and farm as 'partners', it was unusual at this time for a female to initiate and manage a farming-related enterprise. Even today, farming and dairying are male-dominated fields. Lydia was truly remarkable because she succeeded as a businesswoman and housewife at a time when the latter provided full-time employment for most women.